

## STALKING THE SHERIFF

Continued from page 4



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gently. Wal, she wouldn't marry me anyway after I've laid out that Maverick—an' he's simply got to die!"

It was hard for Shorty Regan to think that, though Pearl Bassett had seemed to love him, she was not partizan enough to share in his wish for revenge. Women were strange creatures. Perhaps even now she was on the way to warn Steve that his enemy was free and would soon be upon his trail. She baffled his understanding. Too bad! But in a year or so she might change her mind. He prayed that she might; but nothing could change him in his fierce lust for the life of the man who had sworn him into prison.

SHORTY REGAN yawned, stretched his saddle-wearied legs, and sat up. Gray streaks were beginning to appear above the mesa at the opening of the cañon; but it was not yet light enough for him to pick his way up the side gulch among the rocks and up through the brush to the water hole where last night his aching eyes had made out the campfire of Steve MacFarland.

For three days Regan had scanned the desert and the foothills for the smoke of that campfire. For three days he had cursed his luck and cleaned his Winchester in his fruitless search for the lone horseman whom he knew was somewhere in the wilderness of sand, mesquit, and heat-stabbed mesas that lay to the southward. And now he had located his man!

Shorty shivered a little in the chill morning air. Two years in prison makes a man a little sensitive to early morning cañon drafts. He drew his blanket closer about his shoulders, and with his chin on his palms stared up into the gulch with unseeing eyes, just as he had stared from the edge of his prison cot, gazing blankly at the wall before him. Somehow he had felt that vitascopic scene of the cañon trail would be the true picture. A loud "Hello!" would bring the Sheriff upon one elbow,—Shorty drew the line at shooting a sleeping man,—but before the hand of the startled man could reach his holster a bullet would send him back upon his blanket to sleep into eternity.

Shorty shivered again. It was not pleasant to meet death only half awake; but the man deserved it; he had courted just such a death when he swore him into the pen for fifteen years. And, more than that, he knew that the Sheriff was out for him now and had vowed to take him alive or dead. It was merely Shorty's good luck that he had doubled upon MacFarland's trail, and that the pursuer, though he did not know it, had become the pursued.

It was light enough to travel now. Regan shook the sand out of his blanket, folded it neatly, and carefully rolled it up. Then he washed his face at the water hole, and by the aid of his pocket mirror he combed his hair and brushed it neatly. If he should merely wing his man and should be shot down himself, he would look clean and fit when borne into town, and that was a great point with so tidy a man as Shorty Regan. He parted his hair as close to the middle as the dim light of four in the morning would permit. Then he rose and went over to where his hobbled mustang was cropping the scant blades of withered bunch grass. A few minutes' further preparation found him ready for the trail. He would breakfast later, maybe out of the Sheriff's kit. There would be a can of condensed milk, he knew, and that was good; for he liked condensed milk in his coffee.

It was a little darker in the deep gulch, and his horse stumbled repeatedly over the rough spots. It would be an hour's ride to the Sheriff's camp; but there would be plenty of time to get there before sunrise. The fresh hoofmarks, readily noted here and there by his range-trained eyes, would lead him to the place. Up through the straggly piñons his pony climbed steadily. In the gray sky overhead all but a few of the brightest stars had faded from view. Once a coyote slunk across his path; but no other living creature entered his vision.

FIVE o'clock and broad daylight found Regan tying his horse to a sapling at the edge of the dry creekbed. Screened by a cottonwood thicket a few hundred yards farther up the gulch was the spring beside which the Sheriff had stopped for the night. It was not the first time Regan had visited the place, and he lost little time threading his way up through the brush.

A horse grazing at the end of a picket rope nickered softly. In an instant the blue barrel of Shorty's Winchester covered the form beneath the brown blanket beside the big gray rock; but it did not move. The neigh-

ing of the horse had not awakened his man. Regan crept nearer. A twig cracked sharply under his foot as he rose behind a rock, and quickly the rifle barrel gleamed in the light of the sun which was just appearing over the top of the ridge. But still the Sheriff did not move. He lay there as one dead in the shadow of the rock.

"Sound asleep," muttered Shorty. "Sho! It's too blamed easy!" He wormed his way to within a dozen yards of the man on the ground. MacFarland was lying on his side, his head cushioned on his right arm, while the other lay stretched across his chest. Of a sudden Shorty caught sight of a number of dark brown patches on the Sheriff's gray blanket. Other patches of the same kind freckled the arm and the collar of the light woolen suit he wore. What were they?

"Some kind of bugs, I guess," was his mental remark. "Why, he's all covered with 'em!" Then a quick shiver ran over the avenger's form. "Great Jehoshaphat! They're scorpions!"

A look of keen disappointment came into his eager eyes. Had the venomous creatures robbed him of his revenge? Had they stung the man to death? If so, it was no wonder he did not hear the neighing of his horse nor the snapping of the twig. He gazed sharply at the Sheriff. Now he was so near that he could see the rise and fall of the gray blanket where it swathed the sleeper's breast. That was good. His man was unharmed; he was sleeping peacefully, and not dreaming of the double menace of death that waited his rising up.

Shorty understood. The creatures, chilled by the nipping night air, had crept upon the sleeper to get the warmth of his body. But now it was morning, and they were nearly ready to be astir, as was doubtless the Sheriff. If he made the slightest move, his face and neck and his bare wrists and hands might be pierced by anyone or a dozen of the scores of deadly stingers of the scorpions.

Again the eager onlooker shivered convulsively. The flashed through his mind the picture of a dead Sonoran he had once found on the trail, the skin of his bare arms and legs punctured by many deep wounds into which the poison had entered. He knew that the strong human pulse could resist and the system react against the venom of one or two of these alert, little, lobster-shaped animals; but such a multitudinous charge of quick lances as would follow the Sheriff's slightest movement could hardly be withstood. In other words, it was Shorty's conclusion that if the sleeper moved he would be stung to death.

The shadow of the rock was growing shorter. Its rim was only a foot from MacFarland's face and was creeping steadily toward him through the grass. When the sun should blaze down on his closed eyelids he would open them and sit up. By that time the poison would begin to course through his veins. A bullet would be more merciful. But Shorty had not crossed the desert to shoot the Sheriff as he slept.

Despite the one or two feminine touches in his nature, Shorty was a hard man. His life in the land of sun-parched desert, barbed wire, and cactus had had anything but a softening effect upon him. Coyotes that stole his provisions, angry rattlesnakes that struck at his shaps, and Sheriffs who interfered with his liberty were things to be got rid of and despatched in the quickest way possible.

But there was something about the helplessness of the man in the shadow of the rock that appealed to him in a way that few things had ever done before. He was not afraid of death nor appalled by the spectacle of it; but somehow the impending fate of the man before him made his flesh creep. There was something clean and wholesome about a bullet, even though it plumped through your brain; but these crawling, stinging things!

"Ugh!" Shorty flung up his arm and shook all over. A fly had crawled across the back of his hand.

"Hang it all!" he muttered. "I'm getting to be a regular old woman; but I sure can't stand this!"

ONE thing must be done, and that was to get those scorpions off of MacFarland before he awoke. Shorty looked about for a stick. No, he might brush off two or three that way; but he would be sure to waken the Sheriff.

For a moment he stood nonplussed. Then he remembered a trick of some Mexican children he had seen teasing a captured scorpion. They had placed their prisoner in



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